Managing third space pedagogy through literature circle

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Abstract

This study explores how English teachers manage the implementation of Third Space Pedagogy through Literature Circles in an Islamic Senior High School in Indonesia. Within a faith-based context where classroom practices are shaped by hierarchy and moral discipline, the research investigates how teachers negotiate between institutional authority, cultural values, and dialogic pedagogy. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal that teachers enacted Third Space Pedagogy by (1) negotiating access to literary resources, (2) balancing institutional regulations with student autonomy, (3) fostering dialogic participation, (4) integrating reading and writing as transformative literacy, and (5) redefining achievement through negotiation and sustainability. Teachers acted as cultural mediators, blending Islamic ethics, such as ta'awun (collaboration), tafakkur (reflection), and akhlaq (ethics), with student-centered learning. The study concludes that sustaining Third Space Pedagogy in faith-based schools requires ongoing negotiation between innovation and institutional norms. It demonstrates that Literature Circles can function as culturally responsive and transformative pedagogical spaces that cultivate language proficiency, moral reflection, and student agency.

Keywords: Third space pedagogy, Literature circles, EFL teaching, Islamic education, Teacher management

Introduction

The management of Third Space Pedagogy through Literature Circles represents a promising and contextually responsive innovation in English language teaching, particularly within educational settings shaped by strong religious and institutional traditions. In many Indonesian Islamic senior high schools, classroom instruction remains dominated by teacher-centered practices emphasizing discipline, obedience, and moral guidance. While such practices safeguard the transmission of religious and ethical values, they often leave limited room for dialogic learning, creativity, and student agency. Within this landscape, Literature Circles, collaborative reading groups that promote shared interpretation and reflection (Daniels, 2002), offer an opportunity to create more democratic and participatory learning environments.

Globally, a growing body of research has confirmed the transformative role of *Third Space Pedagogy* in bridging cultural, linguistic, and ideological divides within learning environments. Harrison & Curtis (2024) emphasize that Third Space Pedagogy promotes equity and hybridity in culturally diverse schools by allowing learners and teachers to co-construct meaning across sociocultural boundaries.

Similarly, Abraham (2021) demonstrates how *third space frameworks* in transnational teacher education create spaces of critical reflection and ideological negotiation, enabling teachers to challenge inequitable language and literacy practices. These perspectives position Third Space Pedagogy not merely as a method of inclusion, but as a transformative practice that reconfigures relationships between knowledge, power, and identity.

In the domain of literacy education, the notion of "third space" has long been linked to the New Literacy Studies (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005), which frame literacy as a social and cultural practice rather than a set of isolated skills. Pahl & Kelly (2005) further conceptualize family literacy classrooms as *third spaces* where home and school discourses meet, allowing learners to bring personal and cultural narratives into academic settings. Likewise, Levy (2008) illustrates how young children construct continuity between home and school literacies through multimodal practices, reinforcing that the *third space* serves as a negotiation zone between everyday experiences and institutional expectations. Building on the principles of humanizing pedagogy, Andrews et al. (2019) highlight how inclusive and collaborative educational practices can empower

marginalized voices and foster mutual transformation among teachers and learners, an approach that resonates with the ideals of Third Space inquiry. McKinley et al. (2019) further introduce the idea of a "comfortable third space" in intercultural higher education, where students and teachers engage in identity negotiation and build mutual understanding within globalized academic contexts. Collectively, these studies emphasize that managing Third Space Pedagogy requires awareness of *tensions*, *negotiations*, and *institutional power dynamics* that shape classroom interactions.

Despite this growing evidence, most previous studies have been conducted in Western or secular educational settings. There remains limited understanding of how Third Space Pedagogy operates in faith-based environments where hierarchy, obedience, and moral order strongly influence classroom discourse. As noted by Harrison & Curtis (2024), educational equity in diverse settings requires educators to "co-create hybrid cultures" rather than simply adapt existing methods. This need is particularly acute in Indonesian Islamic senior high schools, where teachers must navigate between institutional authority and the ideals of dialogic pedagogy.

This study, therefore, addresses a crucial gap: how *Third Space Pedagogy*, which merges formal, institutional learning with students' cultural and personal experiences, can be managed and sustained in religious educational settings. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the management dimension of Third Space Pedagogy within an Islamic context. Drawing from Gutiérrez (2008) and Moje et al. (2004) theoretical foundations, and informed by global and local studies, this research extends the concept of Third Space beyond Western frameworks into a culturally embedded EFL environment. It investigates how teachers negotiate pedagogical ideals and institutional expectations to sustain Literature Circles as spaces of creativity, moral development, and collaborative inquiry.

A substantial body of international research has demonstrated that Literature Circles contribute significantly to students' emotional, social, and intellectual growth. Evidence indicates that engaging in these collaborative reading groups can strengthen learners' self-efficacy (Su et al., 2018), promote critical and reflective thinking (Chou, 2022; Cooper, 2019), and enhance interpersonal enjoyment during reading activities (Khokhlova & Bhatia, 2021; Zagar et al., 2019). Moreover, participation in Literature Circles helps students build stronger connections between text and personal experience (Thomas & Kim, 2019; Masih et al., 2025) and increases their motivation to read (Schreuder & Savitz, 2020). Additional studies highlight that this approach nurtures dialogic collaboration (Ro & Burch, 2020), deepens emotional engagement with literature (Sylvan, 2018), and fosters a sense of community and belonging within the classroom (Wexler, 2021; Wyant & Bowen, 2018). Taken together, these findings suggest that Literature Circles function not merely as reading activities but as comprehensive pedagogical models that encourage social interaction, empathy, and learner autonomy.

In the context of an Islamic Senior High School in Jombang, this negotiation becomes particularly significant. Teachers must reconcile the dialogic and student-centered nature of Literature Circles with the hierarchical structure of pesantren-based schooling. Institutional norms, resource limitations, and differing perceptions of "achievement" influence how such programs are managed. Yet, through adaptive strategies, such as integrating culturally relevant texts, encouraging student-led discussions, and forming literacy communities like *Pena PeKa,* teachers transform conventional classrooms into spaces of critical engagement and shared meaning-making. These practices illustrate Third Space Pedagogy as a living practice, balancing institutional discipline with creative agency and dialogic learning.

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how EFL teachers manage Third Space Pedagogy through Literature Circles in an Islamic Senior High School. A qualitative approach was selected because it focuses on understanding participants' experiences, meanings, and interpretations rather than on quantifiable variables (Cresswell, 2014). The case study design allowed the researcher to capture the complexity of pedagogical management, institutional interaction, and teacher agency within a real-world educational context.

The study was conducted at an Islamic Senior High School in Jombang, East Java, Indonesia, which integrates the national curriculum with Islamic religious education. The school provides a compelling context for examining Third Space Pedagogy because it embodies both modern academic and traditional pesantren characteristics. Participants consisted of three EFL teachers actively engaged in implementing Literature Circles and several students who participated in the *Pena PeKa* reading community. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants who had direct involvement with Literature Circles and were capable of providing reflective and detailed information about their experiences.

Data were collected over six months using three complementary methods to ensure triangulation. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with EFL teachers and students to explore the management processes of Literature Circles, the challenges encountered, and the strategies employed to align these practices with institutional norms. Second, classroom and extracurricular observations were carried out to document facilitation styles, discussion dynamics, and the nature of teacher–student interactions during Literature Circle sessions. Finally, document analysis of students' book reviews, reflective essays, lesson plans, and *Pena PeKa* publications was undertaken to examine how reading and writing practices embodied the principles of Third Space Pedagogy. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023). After repeated reading of interview transcripts and field notes, the researcher generated initial codes and identified recurring themes related to the management and negotiation of Third Space Pedagogy.

Findings

The findings of this study reveal how English teachers at an Islamic Senior High School managed *Third Space Pedagogy* through Literature Circles by negotiating institutional constraints, mediating between school and pesantren cultures, and fostering a dialogic literacy environment that merged formal, cultural, and moral learning. Data from interviews, observations, and document analysis generated five key themes: (1) negotiating access to literary resources, (2) balancing institutional regulations and student autonomy, (3) facilitating dialogic participation and training, (4) integrating reading and writing as literacy transformation, and (5) redefining achievement through negotiation and sustainability.

Negotiating access to literary resources

Teachers encountered significant difficulties in finding reading materials that met both the goals of English language learning and the school's religious and moral expectations. The English teachers explained that most of the books available in the school library were textbooks, leaving very limited access to literary works. As Teacher Z described, "*Seventy percent of the books in our library are textbooks. Only a small part, around thirty percent, are encyclopedias or literary works. So, if students want to read stories or novels, we have to find them ourselves.*" This lack of literary resources reflected deeper institutional priorities that emphasized examination performance and curriculum coverage over creative and literary engagement.

In addition, some boarding school administrators viewed novels and stories with caution, believing that they might distract students from religious learning. As Teacher N shared, "*Some teachers said novels might make students too imaginative or emotional. So, we have to be careful when choosing titles.*" This attitude often created tension between the teachers' desire to promote critical and reflective reading and the institutional emphasis on discipline and moral control. Teachers had to constantly negotiate these boundaries, ensuring that chosen literary works were meaningful for language development but also appropriate within the school's moral framework.

To address these challenges, teachers began developing innovative ways to give students better access to literature. They organized donation drives to collect books from alumni and local communities, built a simple online library using Google Drive, and introduced a "mobile bookshelf" system that allowed books to circulate from one classroom to another. The *Pena PeKa* reading community played a vital role in these efforts, acting as both a support network and a space for collaborative learning. As Teacher P explained, "*We made a small corner called Pena Peka*

where students can borrow and return books anytime. It's small, but it keeps the spirit alive."

Through these creative initiatives, teachers were able to turn structural limitations into opportunities for collective growth. By combining formal school structures with student-led activities, they built a *Third Space*, a shared environment where institutional goals, cultural values, and students' personal interests could come together. In this space, reading was no longer limited to textbooks but became a living practice of dialogue, collaboration, and identity formation.

Balancing institutional regulations and student autonomy

Teachers worked within a delicate balance between following school regulations and supporting students' growing interest in expressive reading. The dual nature of the institution, combining a formal school system with *pesantren* traditions, often led to limitations on both the kinds of books students could read and the time available for reading. As Teacher N explained, "*At school, we can use English novels freely, but in the boarding area, some books are not allowed, especially romantic stories. We must follow the rules.*" This reflected the broader challenge of creating a learning space that honored institutional norms while nurturing students' curiosity and imagination.

To manage this tension, teachers developed a flexible approach they called "*safe books in safe times and places.*" Under this principle, students were encouraged to choose culturally appropriate texts during school hours or to explore wider genres at home during holidays. As Teacher Z clarified, "*We don't prohibit their curiosity. We just guide them when and where it's proper. Reading must still respect the pesantren environment.*" This approach allowed teachers to respect institutional boundaries without suppressing students' enthusiasm for literature.

In practice, teachers carefully selected Islamic-themed or morally grounded literary works as bridges between traditional and modern forms of reading. They often began with Arabic fables, moral stories, or religious biographies before gradually introducing world literature and contemporary narratives. This thoughtful sequencing not only

ensured cultural appropriateness but also helped students recognize the shared human values present across diverse texts.

Such practices illustrate the core of Third Space Pedagogy, a negotiated space where institutional discipline meets personal expression. Within this space, teachers and students co-created learning experiences that were both meaningful and respectful of their cultural and religious context. As one student shared, "*We can read different stories, but we also learn how to connect them with our values. It makes reading not just for fun but for reflection.*" This statement reflects how students began to see reading as a dialogic process, an opportunity to explore ideas freely while remaining grounded in their moral and spiritual identity.

Facilitating dialogic participation and training

Teachers introduced Literature Circles as an innovative approach to discussion activity in Literature Circles, aiming to move away from the traditional, teacher-centered methods commonly used in *pesantren* environments, such as *bandongan* (lecture-style teaching) or *sorogan* (individual recitation). At the beginning, however, many students found it difficult to adapt to this new format. They were accustomed to memorization, repetition, and one-way instruction, so the idea of open discussion felt unfamiliar. As Teacher P explained, "*The first time we tried, most students were silent. They waited for my explanation as usual. They didn't realize they could discuss their own ideas.*" This early stage highlighted how deeply ingrained hierarchical classroom dynamics were, and how challenging it was to cultivate student voice and agency.

To help students adjust, teachers carefully modeled the process of dialogic participation. They demonstrated how to take on specific group roles such as discussion leader, connector, summarizer, and questioner, which encouraged structure and responsibility within the group. As Teacher P recalled, "*I joined their group first, giving examples and asking questions. Once they saw how to do it, they began to take turns and lead the discussion themselves.*" Through consistent practice and encouragement, students gradually grew more confident in expressing opinions, asking questions,

and responding to each other's ideas.

Over time, this transformation extended beyond classroom routines. The students' discussion patterns began to reflect *Bahtsul Masail*, a well-known *pesantren* tradition of collective reasoning and respectful debate. Teacher P observed, "*When they discussed, it reminded me of Bahtsul Masail, students argued politely, gave examples, and used logic. It's similar, only in English*." This blending of Western dialogic pedagogy and Islamic intellectual tradition created a genuine *Third Space*, that is a hybrid environment where students could explore new modes of thinking without abandoning their cultural and spiritual roots.

As the Literature Circles progressed, students not only improved their English proficiency but also developed confidence and a sense of ownership in learning. They began to see the classroom as a place of shared inquiry rather than passive instruction. One student expressed this shift clearly: "*I feel free to share my opinion. It's different from other classes where the teacher always talks. Here, we also listen to each other*." This statement summarizes how Literature Circles became a transformative space, bridging tradition and innovation, authority and collaboration, and shaping students into active participants in their own learning journey.

Integrating reading and writing as literacy transformation

The implementation of Literature Circles gradually expanded beyond oral discussions, evolving into a broader practice of written reflection and creative expression. After each group meeting, students were encouraged to produce book reviews, reflective essays, or short opinion pieces related to the texts they had read. What began as a teacher-directed activity soon became a self-motivated practice? As Teacher P recalled, "*At first, I only asked them to write one review. But after a few meetings, they wrote every time without me asking. They enjoyed seeing their writing published.*" This enthusiasm reflected how students were beginning to internalize reading and writing as meaningful, interconnected processes rather than as separate classroom tasks.

To make their work more authentic and rewarding, teachers published the students' writings on the *Pena* *PeKa* blog and other online platforms. Having a real audience beyond the classroom gave students a new sense of pride and ownership over their ideas. One student expressed this excitement, saying, "*When my article was published, I felt proud. My friends read it and commented. It motivated me to read and write more.*" This external recognition turned reading and writing into social acts, strengthening students' confidence and engagement with literacy.

Teachers also played a crucial role in guiding this process by editing and curating the students' works. The classroom gradually transformed into a collaborative writing workshop, where teachers acted as mentors and editors rather than sole authorities. This practice embodied Freire & Macedo's (2005) concept of praxis, the cycle of reflection and action that leads to deeper learning and empowerment. As Teacher N highlighted, "*Now they don't just consume books, they produce ideas. That's the goal of literacy.*"

Through this ongoing cycle of discussion, reflection, and publication, the Literature Circles became a platform for literacy transformation. Students were no longer passive recipients of knowledge. They became readers, thinkers, and writers who could articulate their perspectives and contribute to public discourse. This integration of dialogic reading and expressive writing created a vibrant *Third Space*, a learning environment where students discovered their voices, developed confidence, and engaged in meaningful acts of authorship.

Redefining achievement through negotiation and sustainability

Institutional understandings of "achievement" often conflicted with the teachers' broader vision of literacy development. While school administrators tended to value measurable accomplishments such as competition trophies, exam scores, or certificates, teachers believed that students' publications, public presentations, and creative outputs represented more meaningful and authentic indicators of academic growth. As Teacher P reflected, "*When our students presented their papers at the National Santri Day Seminar, we were very proud. But the school didn't count it as an achievement because it wasn't a competition.*" This mismatch revealed a deeper

institutional mindset that equated success with quantifiable results, overlooking the intellectual and reflective dimensions of literacy learning that the teachers required to cultivate.

Despite the limited formal recognition, teachers continued to advocate for the educational and transformative value of these activities. To strengthen their position and ensure the continuity of their initiatives, they worked to formalize *Pena PeKa*, originally a grassroots reading club, into an official extracurricular program. This step provided institutional legitimacy and access to school resources while maintaining student-led participation. As Teacher Z explained, "*We needed to make it official, so it wouldn't disappear when teachers change. Now it's part of the school's literacy program*." Through this formalization, *Pena PeKa* became both a protected space for creativity and a recognized component of the school's literacy agenda.

However, institutionalization also brought new challenges. Teachers had to continuously negotiate autonomy and accountability, ensuring that the spirit of student ownership was not reduced by organizational expectations. This process reflects what this study conceptualizes as a Negotiation Space, a dynamic environment where teachers balance creativity with regulation, and innovation with institutional approval. Within this space, teachers acted as mediators, aligning transformative pedagogical goals with the school's administrative framework.

Students, meanwhile, came to see *Pena PeKa* as more than just a program, it became a community of practice. One student described, "*At first, it was just a reading club. Now it's our community. We learn, discuss, write, and share. It feels like our own project*." This sentiment captures the essence of Third Space Pedagogy in action, a space that belongs to both teachers and students, where dialogue, collaboration, and creativity thrive within an environment shaped by mutual respect and shared purpose.

Managing Third Space Pedagogy through Literature Circles at this Islamic High School required teachers to navigate complex layers of negotiation between institutional demands and pedagogical ideals, between tradition and modernity, and between authority and agency. Through continuous adaptation, innovating resources, contextualizing content, fostering dialogue, and promoting reflective writing, teachers succeeded in sustaining a hybrid learning culture that empowered students as readers, writers, and thinkers. These findings suggest that the long-term sustainability of Third Space Pedagogy depends not solely on teacher enthusiasm or student engagement, but on the capacity to manage negotiation, a continuous balancing act between institutional norms and transformative educational aspirations.

Discussions

This study demonstrates how teachers in an Islamic Senior High School negotiated institutional constraints to create a culturally grounded form of Third Space Pedagogy through Literature Circles. Instead of opposing established norms, teachers aligned dialogic literacy practices with the school's moral framework, particularly values such as *ta'awun*, *tafakkur*, and *akhlaq*. This adaptive strategy reflects Gutiérrez's (2008) notion of transformative hybridity, where new pedagogical forms emerge through the blending of cultural and institutional resources. By practicing pedagogical diplomacy, teachers introduced dialogic methods in ways that respected Islamic norms, echoing Abraham's (2021) idea of ideological negotiation and Andrews et al.'s (2019) emphasis on humanizing, inclusive pedagogy. Within this context, authority was repositioned rather than diminished; teachers maintained leadership while opening structured space for student voice.

The findings further indicate that Literature Circles successfully shifted learning from teacher-dominated instruction toward dialogic and collaborative literacy. Although students initially hesitated, structured roles and guided modeling enabled them to participate more confidently. Over time, their discussions resembled *Bahtsul Masail*, an established pesantren tradition of collective reasoning, illustrating how Western dialogic practices and Islamic intellectual culture can merge productively. This hybrid engagement reflects Third Space theory (Gutiérrez, 2008; Moje et al., 2004) and reinforces Pahl and Rowsell's (2005) view of literacy as socially and culturally situated. As students drew on faith-

based insights to interpret texts, the classroom became a site where institutional goals met personal experiences, enabling literacy to function as both academic inquiry and identity work.

Moral and cultural literacy also played a central role in shaping these Third Space practices. Teachers selected texts that aligned with Islamic ethics while encouraging engagement with global narratives. Students frequently connected story themes to Quranic principles, demonstrating the integration of moral reasoning into literacy events. This supports Moje et al.'s (2004) argument that Third Space learning connects academic study with personal and community-based identities. By using familiar religious narratives as an entry point to global texts, teachers cultivated both moral confidence and cultural openness, contributing to a culturally responsive form of English language teaching (Harrison & Curtis, 2024). This integration required ongoing sensitivity, as teachers balanced critical thinking with religious commitments, reinforcing Abraham's (2021) notion of negotiation across belief systems.

Ensuring motivation and sustainability emerged as another significant dimension of Third Space Pedagogy. The establishment of the Pena PeKa reading community extended literacy beyond the classroom and provided students with authentic audiences through publication and public reflection. Such practices align with Freire and Macedo's (2005) concept of praxis, where reflection and action intersect. Teachers also addressed institutional concerns regarding literary materials by curating texts that met ethical expectations and developing guidelines that maintained moral legitimacy. This continuous mediation generated what can be understood as a Negotiation Space, a practical extension of Third Space in which innovation and institutional regulation coexisted. The formalization of Pena PeKa as an official extracurricular program further ensured long-term sustainability, illustrating how transformative hybridity (Gutiérrez, 2008) operates at the organizational level.

Finally, the study highlights how teachers redefined achievement and advanced their professional agency within a structured and faith-based environment. While institutional metrics emphasized examinations

and competitions, teachers advocated for recognizing critical reading, reflective writing, and student publications as legitimate forms of success. Through negotiation and strategic framing, they broadened institutional definitions of achievement to include creativity, authorship, and intellectual engagement. This process exemplifies Third Space dynamics (Moje et al., 2004), where institutional expectations and pedagogical values intersect to enable new forms of educational meaning. By institutionalizing student-led literacy initiatives, teachers demonstrated agency not only as classroom facilitators but also as cultural mediators and policy negotiators. Their work underscores Harrison and Curtis's (2024) argument that effective Third Space educators co-create hybrid cultures that honor both structure and student voice.

Overall, the findings show that Third Space Pedagogy can thrive in faith-based educational settings when teachers creatively negotiate cultural, institutional, and moral boundaries. Through alignment with Islamic values, dialogic literacy practices became both innovative and contextually legitimate. This study demonstrates that educational transformation in religious schools does not require radical disruption; it can emerge through careful negotiation, cultural responsiveness, and sustained teacher agency.

Conclusion

This study shows how English teachers implemented Literature Circles as Third Space Pedagogy in an Islamic Senior High School by negotiating institutional demands, cultural values, and pedagogical goals. Instead of resisting the faith-based environment, teachers adapted dialogic practices to align with Islamic ethics, demonstrating that student-centered learning can thrive in structured settings. Teachers served as cultural mediators, blending global literacy practices with local religious traditions. Through *ta'awun*, *tafakkur*, and *akhlaq*, Literature Circles became spaces for collaboration, reflection, and ethical dialogue, echoing the spirit of *Bahtsul Masail* and showing that innovation can emerge from cultural continuity. The work extended beyond the classroom. Teachers secured resources and institutional support through initiatives like Pena PeKa and mobile libraries, forming a Negotiation Space where innovation and regulation were

balanced.

Theoretically, the study highlights the managerial dimension of Third Space Pedagogy, showing that sustaining cultural hybridity in faith-based schools requires administrative alignment as well as pedagogical creativity. Practically, it demonstrates that dialogic, collaborative approaches can support language learning and moral development when backed by teacher agency and institutional recognition.

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